

Ethics of “Taste, Ties, and Time”

Xuancheng Qian

The line between good and evil is permeable.
-Phil Zimbardo

A group of Harvard sociologists conducted a research project on the nature and dynamics of social network based on Facebook dataset involving an entire cohort of 1,700 college students at an anonymous, northeastern American university from 2006 and 2009 (Zimmer 2010). The research team combined students' residential information, academic majors with Facebook profiles that included background, demographics, interests, group affiliations as well as cultural tastes (Lewis et al. 2008). However, this new study has raised great ethical concerns when the data was publicly released in 2008. Although the dataset was anonymized, some information was specific and the source of the data was quickly identified by an outside researcher (Zimmer 2010; Parry 2011). In this paper, I would discuss how this research project adheres to Salganik's four principles of ethical research, and explain why I would not use this data for research (if made available).

Applying the principle-based analysis to this project could help us understand the ethical challenges that researchers face in the digital age. Respect for persons is the first principle. This principle deals with autonomy and protections, which suggests that researchers should let people control their own lives. Researchers in this project used participants' data without their informed consent even though all procedures were reviewed and approved by Harvard's IRB and Facebook. As parts of Facebook's Data Use Policy, Facebook outline the situations for which it reserves the right to use your information, and some examples of how that information may be used (Facebook 2016). However, there are still potential problems related to this ethical issue. Studies have shown that users frequently simply “click through” such agreements without fully reading them or recognizing they are entering into a legally binding contract (Gatt 2002). So every student who has Facebook account would have to agree with the term of use even though they might not read carefully. Furthermore, they did not allow other individuals or organizations to download their profiles and invite subsequent uses for further research outside Facebook. And the Taste, Ties, and Time (T3) researchers linked their residential information, academic majors with their profiles under the help with research assistant within the same university which actually violated the ethics of privacy.

What of balancing risks and benefits in this study? The second principle is Beneficence which is about analyzing the potential trade-off, minimizing risk and maximizing benefits and then deciding whether it strikes the appropriate balance. There is no doubt that this project would benefit the research of social network and help us understand society better. As researchers have mentioned, it would offer “substantial insights into the lives and social networks of a complete cohort of college students” (Lewis et al. 2008). However, they did not take the informational risk seriously. The researchers in Taste, Ties, and Time might have attempted to clean the dataset, but the dataset contained specific information which was easily discovered. The risk increased

sharply when the dataset was released publicly. Researchers said that “All identifying information was deleted or encoded immediately after the data were downloaded” and that “all the data is cleaned so you cannot connect anyone to an identity” (Lewis et al. 2008), but this process was not sufficient to protect the data. They should make some extra effort to protect students’ privacy as personally identifiable information still exists and could be used to re-identify participants.

The principle of Justice addresses the distribution of the burdens and benefits of research. In this case, the burdens of research fall on students even the student group is not an especially vulnerable population, while the benefits flow to society. The students would have to burden the cost of this research through lack of informed consent, invasion of their privacy and disclosure of identity to public.

Last but not least, Respect for law and public interest is the fourth principle which consists of compliance and transparency-based accountability. Compliance means that researchers should identify and obey relevant laws, contracts, and term of service. The T3 researchers downloaded the profile dataset with permission from Facebook. On the one hand, all the procedures were reviewed under Harvard’s IBR and Facebook. On the other hand, the T3 researchers did not obtain any informed consent by the participants and nor were they asked to do so by their Institutional Review Board. This also led to the debate whether the research violated the Protection of Human Subjects because of breaching students’ privacy (45 CFR 46) Further, the project team published their results in the academic journals and this ensured the transparency-based accountability.

From my perspective, I would not use this data for my own research (if made available). There are several reasons for that. First of all, this project violated the principle of Respect for persons as students had not provided informed consent. As many researchers would argue and try to avoid having to obtain appropriate informed consent, since they worry that potential subjects, if asked, would refuse to participate. But it would be necessary for the participants to have the right to decide whether I would accept the term and be enrolled to the study. Thus, any researcher needs to ask us to scroll down and click "I accept," even assuming we're unlikely to read the dense legalese and simply accept their terms. The T3 researchers could have adopted some options to get informed consent from students and protect their rights but they did not take any action. Secondly, this dataset contains a lot of personally identifiable information even this dataset was anonymized. The codebook reveals that there is only a single student from each of these states like Delaware, Louisiana represented in the dataset. It could be very possible to re-identify the student and this would lead to the significant invasion of privacy. Thirdly, researchers wanting access to the dataset must sign a Terms and Conditions of Use statement. But the monitoring or enforcing compliance is unclear. And finally it would be very important that researchers reconsider the protection actions taken to deter the disclosure of identity.

The line between good and evil is permeable. Good experiments benefit society, but we can never let research across the line and impinge on people’s rights.

Reference

1. Salganik, Matthew J. 2017. *Bit by Bit: Social Research in the Digital Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Open review edition.
2. Zimmer, M., 2010. "But the data is already public": on the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and information technology*, 12(4), pp.313-325.
3. Lewis, K., Kaufman, J., Gonzalez, M., Wimmer, A. and Christakis, N., 2008. Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook. *com.Social networks*, 30(4), pp.330-342.
4. Parry, M. and Chase, J., 2011. Harvard researchers accused of breaching students' privacy. *chronicle*, 1, p.30
5. Facebook. Retrieved October 10, 2016, from <https://www.facebook.com/about/privacy>
6. 45 CFR 46. (2016). Retrieved October 10, 2016, from <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/regulations/45-cfr-46/index.html>